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Torch (May 2015)

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Civil Rights Team Project

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THE TORCH (CRTP NEWSLETTER) MAY '15

The Civil Rights Team Project

We get schools to think and talk about issues related to race and skin color, national origin and ancestry, religion, physical and mental disabilities, gender, and sexual orientation (including gender identity and expression.)



Here's what you can read about in the May edition of *The Torch*:

From the Teams: Based on the great work our civil rights teams are doing, it's too bad that we're nearing the end of the 2014-2015 school year!

From the Office: Civil rights education for the educators of tomorrow and another great night for the Civil Rights Team Project with the Portland Sea Dogs.

From the News: Bruce Jenner, school mascots, and why it's a great time to be active in civil rights work.

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This newsletter is written and distributed by the Civil Rights Team Project, a state-wide program under the auspices of the Maine Office of the Attorney General. The mission of the Civil Rights Team Project is to increase the safety of elementary, middle level, and high school students by reducing bias-motivated behaviors and harassment in our schools.

Brandon Baldwin—Program Manager, Newsletter Editor
Debi Lettre—Civil Rights Project Administrator
Janet Mills—Attorney General



From the Teams:

At Cape Elizabeth Middle School... the civil rights team promoted “A Lot Alike” Week.

The event highlighted the idea that in spite of real differences that exist amongst people based on their race and skin color, national origin and ancestry, religion, disabilities, gender (including gender identity and expression), and sexual orientation, we are actually all a lot alike. Some of the ways the team highlighted this important concept included:

- Leading an advisory activity where students created Venn diagrams exploring unexpected commonalities.
- Hosting a speaker, [Mitch Sturgeon](#), with Multiple Sclerosis who looked at the ways his life is similar to people without significant disabilities.
- Wrapping up the week by having everyone wear the school colors, highlighting the idea that even with their differences, they are all a part of Cape Elizabeth Middle School.

Hey, CEMS civil rights team... what a great way to end your first year in the Civil Rights Team Project! We like our civil rights teams to stay active right through June, and you're doing your best work now. You created activities that were both engaging and intellectual. That's always a great accomplishment, but it's especially impressive in May. (And thanks to their advisors, Stephanie Bouffard and Kim Sturgeon, for sharing.)

At Gorham Middle School... the civil rights team challenged their peers to decorate their school's doors in civil rights friendly messages. In the weeks leading up to the actual door decorating, though, students participated in two advisory sessions where they explored the six civil rights identities, the concepts of bias and discrimination, and activities from the [Love Has No Labels](#) campaign. The civil rights team created and delivered a 30 minute presentation to get students ready for their challenge: “Please decorate your advisor's door in a way that represents that Gorham Middle School is a welcoming, respectful, and safe school.” All 51 advisory groups completed a door that day, and the civil rights team baked edible prizes for the groups that created the three displays deemed best by a judging panel.

Hey, GMS civil rights team: This is a great way to include your school in what you do! I was in your school to see the finished doors, and they look *great*. The students clearly took your challenge seriously. I'm particularly impressed with the extent to which the doors are clearly about civil rights issues, explicitly highlighting race and skin color, national origin and ancestry, religion, disabilities, gender (including gender identity and expression), and sexual orientation. That doesn't happen by accident, and it is clear



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evidence of the thoughtful work that went into this project before anyone started decorating doors. Now, happy baking... and be sure to save a few edible treats for yourselves! (And thanks to their advisor, Meghan Rounds, for sharing.)

In Lewiston... the **Lewiston High School** civil rights team partnered with the YWCA for their national event, [Stand Against Racism](#). They worked with the YWCA of Central Maine in Lewiston and students from Bates College in planning the event. Then, on a Saturday at the YWCA, civil rights team members facilitated a community dialogue around issues of systemic racism. The dialogue included four breakout sessions. Participants then created posters which were on full display for a unified walk through the downtown. The event closed, as *any* good event should close, with ice cream provided by Bates College.

The event received considerable press, too! Check [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).

Hey, LHS civil rights team... this is the kind of leadership we need in our schools and communities! People are reluctant to engage in meaningful conversations about race and racism, but you are helping people go there... *and we have to go there*. You are giving communities of color opportunities to be heard, and white allies opportunities to learn and show support. I know that you have more dialogue planned for the future, and I can't wait to hear about it. (And thanks to their advisor, Paula Gerencer, for sharing.)

At **Richmond Middle School**... the civil rights team created an entire day of civil rights and anti-bias education for their school. Students rotated through nine mini-workshops that were almost entirely led by RMS civil rights team members. The day also included an introductory presentation outlining the day's events, an online survey, and a screening of the Teaching Tolerance film [Bullied](#).

I'd have more to say about it here, but they got some great press coverage in the *Brunswick Times-Record* that you should check out [right here](#).

Hey, RMS civil rights team... you delivered an entire day of civil rights content! It's impressive that it was thematically connected and that you addressed all six of the civil rights identities. Most impressive, though, is how visible you were throughout the day. Students had many opportunities to learn about bias and civil rights during Civil Rights Day, but perhaps the most important lesson they learned is that other young people in their school community care deeply about these issues. (And thanks to their advisors, Dan Tompkins and John Libby, for sharing.)

At **Walton Elementary School in Auburn**... the civil rights team created a series of skits to show their peers what bias looks like and how inclusive behaviors are the anti-bias anecdote. The students wrote a series of three skits that focused on exclusion related to race, stereotypes related to gender, and obnoxious questions directed at



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someone related to disabilities. The skits were linked by a playground games theme, with each centering on a clear example of bias-based behavior followed by a resolution through inclusive behaviors. The team performed the skits at a school-wide morning meeting, which is also open to their community, to an audience of more than 300.

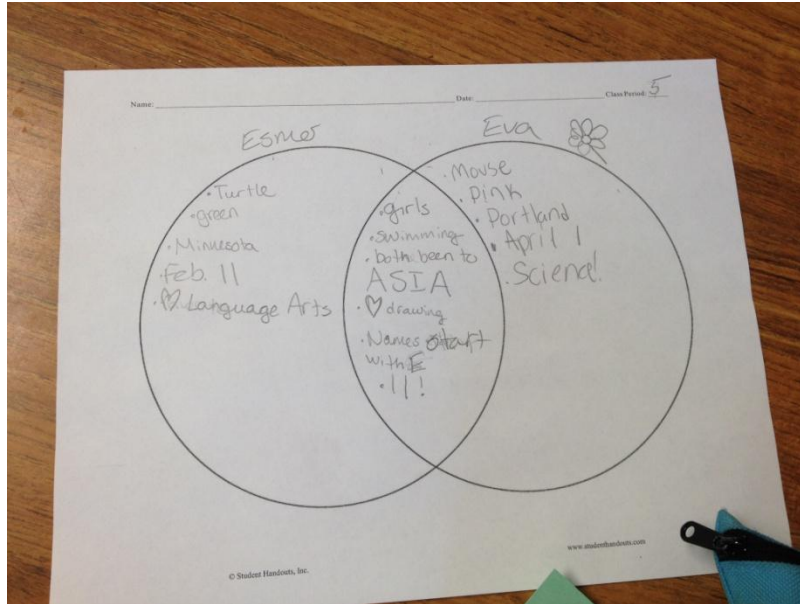
Hey, Walton civil rights team... nice job keeping your skits focused on civil rights issues. It's not easy to highlight what bias based on race, disabilities, and gender looks like... especially in terms what you might see or hear on an elementary school playground. But you did it, and you gave your school something to think about, including how students can take action to lessen the harmful impact of bias-based behaviors. (And thanks to their advisor, Judy Milligan, for sharing.)

And finally, at **schools all around the state**, civil rights teams have organized Diversity Day events. Congratulations to the civil rights teams at Carrabec High School in North Anson, Gorham High School, Oak Hill Middle School in Sabattus, and South Portland High School for challenging your schools to think and talk about civil rights issues!



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A Venn diagram from Cape Elizabeth Middle School's "A Lot Alike" Week...



Some of the nicely decorated doors from Gorham Middle School...





From the Office:

New Teams!

We have a new civil rights team at Troy Howard Middle School in Belfast, and they aren't even waiting until next year to start meeting. Dr. Martin Luther King was right: *the time is always right to do what is right*. Welcome!

I have also heard from a good number of schools who plan on starting teams next fall. Expect to see a long list of new participants next fall in *The Torch*.



Getting into Postsecondary Education

Every semester I have the privilege of training student teachers at the University of Maine at Farmington in Challenging Bias in Our Schools. These are two of my favorite dates on my calendar every year. The work feels especially meaningful, as these future educators are eager to learn and put the practical aspects of the training into practice. (I am also intensely aware that every one of them is a potential civil rights team advisor!)

These trainings are very much worth my time, so much so that I have started looking for similar opportunities in other Maine colleges and universities. In recent months, I've worked with the Counselors in Training students at USM and a Social Studies Methods course at St. Joseph's. (It is certainly worth noting here that it was former civil rights team advisors who got me in at both schools. A big thank you to Karin Congleton and Sarah Rubin!)

Both experiences were wonderful, and we're already discussing future opportunities for collaboration. It is my hope that these are the first steps in establishing more permanent, ongoing relationships with the education programs at both schools, and that we'll have more and more educators entering our schools with civil rights training.

An Evening with the Sea Dogs

On May 8th more than 600 participants in the Civil Rights Team Project, representing 34 of our schools, attended our fourth annual event with the Portland Sea Dogs at Hadlock Field. We had a pregame parade around the field as the videoboard listed the names of schools and students present and some on-field remarks from yours truly. Since most of our participating schools and students weren't able to attend, I'll share my remarks right here...



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Good evening, and welcome to Civil Rights Night with the Portland Sea Dogs. I want to talk to you briefly about optimism, because I think it has a lot to do with baseball and the work all of us do in the Civil Rights Team Project.

Optimism is a positive outlook and the ability to believe that things can be better in the future. And optimism and baseball go hand in hand...

Every February here in Maine, baseball fans look out their windows at the piles of snow of ice and remind ourselves that spring training is starting, that the teams are down in Florida getting ready, and we start counting the days until Opening Day and looking forward to those first sights of green grass at the ball park, reminding ourselves that winter doesn't last forever.

That's optimism.

And on Opening Day, every single team and all the fans believe that this might be their year. We tell ourselves stories about how if everything works out and we catch a few breaks along the way, then this year, this team could be good enough to get into the playoffs and win it all.

That's optimism.

As fans we show up here at the ball park, not just to cheer on the Sea Dogs or whoever our home team is, but because we also know that no matter



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how many games we've seen in our lifetime, every single time we see a game, we might see something special, something singular, something spectacular... something we've never seen before and will remember for the rest of our lives.

That's optimism.

Every single player we see here tonight, and in every minor league park across the country... they all have the same dream. It doesn't matter how old they are, where they come from, how much money they're making, what they did last year, or whether they're a highly hyped prospect or a journeyman minor leaguer or a Major leaguer rehabbing an injury... *none of that matters*, because they ALL want the same thing, and that's the opportunity to play baseball and make it to the top to play for the Boston Red Sox or the Colorado Rockies or whoever their Major League club is. They all have that dream.

That's optimism.

But what about civil rights, and you, the more than 500 students we have here tonight who are a part of the Civil Rights Team Project?

Well, in the Civil Rights Team Project we believe that our school communities should be safe, welcoming, and respectful places for students of all identities. And that while our race, ancestry, religious beliefs, abilities and disabilities, gender, and sexual orientation are important pieces of who we are, it's not OK to take these things and make them the basis for prejudice and discrimination and hate.

Unfortunately, we know that our schools and communities are not always safe, welcoming, and respectful places. Far too often people will use someone's race, ancestry, religion, disabilities, gender, or sexual orientation as a reason to ignore them, dismiss them, belittle them, or abuse them. It happens, here in Maine, in our schools and our communities, and it happens too much.

But this is where optimism is important... because rather than accept this and just say that this is the way things are and will always be, **YOU**, the student and adult participants in the Civil Rights Team Project, you work to change our school communities. You engage and you educate and you advocate for the idea that we can do better, that we can create schools that are safe, welcoming, and respectful for every single student who sets foot inside those doors. And not only do you think we can do this, but you work to make it happen.



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That. Is. Optimism.

And your optimism deserves recognition. We have students from 34 schools here tonight, and another 125 more schools participating in the Civil Rights Team Project, all around the state. I've even heard from 6 more schools in the last month who are ready to start civil rights teams next fall.

So tonight we are here to celebrate. We're here to celebrate you and the wonderful work you do in our schools through the Civil Rights Team Project. We're here to celebrate the power of optimism and the belief that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can work together to change the world. We're here to celebrate the idea that we can create the kind of schools and communities that we all want, where people of all identities feel safe, welcome, and respected for who they are. And of course, we're here to celebrate the beautiful game of baseball and another Sea Dogs victory here tonight!

So let's have a big round of applause for Civil Rights Night with the Portland Sea Dogs!

* * * * *

While the Sea Dogs played one of their worst games of the season and it was *far too cold* for outdoor activities, we all had a great time. Thank you to Electricity Maine for sponsoring the event and generously covering the cost of our tickets, and Courtney Rague and the Portland Sea Dogs for all their work in making everything happen. They all do a great job in recognizing the great work we all do in the Civil Rights Team Project.



From the News:

Ten Thoughts Regarding Bruce Jenner

In an interview with Diane Sawyer on 20/20 on April 26, Bruce Jenner shared that he is a transgender woman. This feels like an important moment and something worth writing about here in *The Torch*. I have so many thoughts in response to this event that a list feels appropriate. Here are ten thoughts regarding Bruce Jenner:



1. Good for him. That has to be #1. He seems relieved. He seems comfortable. He is becoming, and being, himself.
2. I will admit that it feels weird to call him Bruce Jenner and use male pronouns to describe him when he just revealed that he is a transgender woman. But people are different and identify in different ways. We should honor people's choices and identities and call them what they want to be called. My feeling weird is far less important than respecting someone for their identity.
3. This is a big deal! Because of his status as an elite Olympic athlete in the 1970s and his role on *Meet the Kardashians*, Bruce Jenner is definitely the most prominent trans person in America. Because of Jenner's interview and announcement, many Americans are getting a Trans 101 education through pop culture and current events. The voice and visibility that Jenner offers trans people and issues is significant.
4. This may seem to contradict #3, but for many Americans, this is not a big deal... *and that in itself is a big deal*. It indicates that lots of people already know something about gender identity, the difference between sex and gender, and what it means to be transgender. Bruce Jenner is providing Trans 101 education for a lot of people, but a lot of people already have this knowledge base.
5. The interview with Dianne Sawyer was mostly respectful. It did not treat him like a curiosity or freak show. Would that have happened ten or even five years ago?
6. Doesn't this feel sort of like the 90's when Ellen DeGeneres came out as gay? And look at what's happened since then with the gay rights movement; two pretty good decades of achievement. Is the same thing about to happen for the trans part of the LGBT community and movement?
7. It is definitely worth noting that Bruce Jenner's lived experience is not typical for trans people. He has enormous levels of privilege. He has opportunities that many trans people do not enjoy.



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8. Last week, 21-year-old London Chanel was stabbed to death in Philadelphia. *She is the eighth trans woman of color to be murdered this year.* Why isn't that in the news?

We should know their names. London Chanel. Lamia Beard. Taja DeJusus. Penny Proud. Ty Underwood. Yazmin Vash Payne. B. Golec. Kristina Gomez Reinwald.

Their lives matter, too... but they'll never get a two hour interview on *20/20*.

9. Another interview featuring a trans activist and high profile media personality that is getting considerably less attention, but is completely worth your time, is Oprah's interview with Janet Mock. Check it out [right here](#).

10. This is all about voice and visibility. Bruce Jenner is expanding the voice and visibility of trans people. But he isn't doing it all by himself. Other celebrities like Rupaul, Chaz Bono, and Laverne Cox helped lay the groundwork for this important moment. Organizations and advocacy groups have made this moment happen. Average everyday people in our local communities have made this moment happen. Trans issues are becoming more and more prominent because trans people are more vocal and visible now than at any other time.

That's true for trans people, but it's also true for people of other marginalized identities. People who have been silenced and made invisible are making themselves seen and heard. For those of us who care about creating safe, welcoming, and respectful schools and communities, *this is everything*. We now have unprecedented ability and opportunities to learn about people of different identities, and that can only improve our work here in the Civil Rights Team Project.

It truly is an exciting time. Thanks for reading.